

FOLK DANCING -- WHAT IS IT?

(This Article has been prepared by VIRGIL MORTON for the Beginners Class of CHANGS INTERNATIONAL FOLK DANCERS. Mr. Morton is a founding member of Changs, and was the original official instructor of the organization.)

The growth of the folk-dance movement in California has been so rapid and large during the last few years that many dancers, and even the teachers, are not allways aware of the intrinsic purpose and cultural heritage behind the dances. A major part of this conflict arises from a misconception of what genuine folk-dancing is, and from a lack of interest in the traditions that have created the dances. It is too often evident, in both dancing and costuming, that people are erroneously interpreting "folk" to mean "quaint" or "hickish".

The following is a brief summary of the types of dance to be found in the present "folk-dance" movement. The only genuine dances are those of the true folk, or ethnic variety, while the "recreational" and "arranged" dances are counterfeit impersonations:

FOLK DANCES are traditional dances that have evolved to tell, in dance form, of the faith, occupation, love, history, etc. of the country of their origin. They are never created by one person or group, but by the participation of the entire tribe or community, and in ancient times dancing was inextricably interwoven with the religious or magic beliefs of the people. True folk dances were never performed for the purpose of amusement alone, but always as a ceremonial rite. It is mostly among the more primitive peoples of the world that this form exists today with living meaning. In the European countries, vestiges of true folk dances remain and many of them show characteristics dating back beyond Christian times. The meanings of most of these dances have long ago been forgotten since the original motivating cause has ceased to exist. In their own countries, as much of the original style as possible has been handed down for generations even though certain movements and figures were obscure to the dancers. This is one of the factors that make it so difficult for an American group to acquire the "style" of the dances from other countries. It is important to remember that genuine folk dances may vary in different sections of their own country, just as the dialects in a language vary. Close observation will reveal a basic likeness throughout these variants, however.

ETHNOLOGIC, or ethnic dance, is a term larger in scope in that it embraces all types of dance performed in a given country and native to that land. These include, as well as the true folk-dances, the social dances that bear certain national characteristics of the country of origin. The Csardas of Hungary, and the polkas and schottisches of various countries fit into this category, since in their countries they are considered ballroom or social dances, and can often be traced back to certain inventors. It is true that these dances take on a certain tradition over a period of time and often borrow from genuine folk-dancing to such an extent that the overlapping makes them difficult to identify.

RECREATIONAL dances are those composed with no other intent than to enjoy the pleasure of kinetic movement. These dances have no serious purpose and do not attempt to conform to any established tradition. In a folk-dance organization, the only harm in recreational dances comes when the composer or some other person attempts to pass the dance as an "authentic" folk-dance. Choreographers of such dances would garner much more credit for themselves if they would also compose origi-

nal music, rather than using well established folk-music, rather than using well established folk-music.

ARRANGED folk-dances can be extremely false in that they often ignore any traditional style or knowledge of the existing dances, music and customs of the country they are supposed to represent.

In learning to dance as other nationalities do, one should take into sympathetic consideration such items as the climate, the clothing and shoes worn, the basic occupation of the people, and the food they eat. Such everyday items often contain the key to the style of the dances of any nation. It requires as much care and skill to learn the dances of a foreign land as it would to learn that nation's language.

GUSTAV'S SKOAL

Gustav's Skoal!

There is no better
skoal than this!

Gustav's Skoal!

The best old Skoal
there is!

Chorus:

Ho fal de-rol jan,

le-jan, li-jan,

Ho fal de-rol jan,

le-jan, li-jan,

Ho fal de-rol jan,

le-jan, li-jan,

Gustav's Skoal!

A visit to the court of Marie Antoinette by Sweden's king, Gustavus III (1746-1792), so impressed Gustavus that, upon his return home, he established theaters and dancing schools in his own country. These schools have greatly enriched the dramatic and folk-arts of Sweden.

It is to the memory of this king that "Gustav's Skoal" is sung and danced. The first part of the dance is a dignified and stately salute; the second part is light and jolly and allows for the "cutting-in" of bystanders. This "cutting-in" is customery in many Swedish dances, but must be done by only one person at a time so that one of the original couple is left until he is replaced by another bystander.

TANGO

As we know it, the Argentine tango falls into the category of a ballroom dance, although it apparently had its origin among the lowly folk of South America. Even though the Tango is not an old dance, dating back not farther than 1880, its exact origin has been lost. Some authorities claim it was derived from a popular dance, the Habanera, which was of Spanish origin. Historians of the dance of Spain believe the rhythm of the Spanish Tango came from Cuba, a Spanish Colony at that time. However, the only thing common to the Tango of Spain and the Tango of the Argentine, are the name and tempo; the dance steps and character being entirely different.

For a long time the upper class Argentine shunned the Tango as being vulgar, since it came from the waterfront dives, and it was not until the time of the first world war when the dance was introduced into the smart cafes of Paris and met with instant success, that it was danced as a popular ballroom dance. The original Argentine Tango was characterized by slow, dragging steps, the feet being kept very close to the floor and the mood being definitely melancholy. The Vaudeville version of the Tango first introduced to America was so exaggerated it resembled the Apache dance, and it has only been during the past twenty years the real Tango has been popular in the ballroom.

SKANSEN

"Why do there seem to be so many more Swedish dances than those from other countries?" That question might be partially explained by the popularity of a "living museum" established about 1900 at Skansen, Sweden.

The Museum is actually a huge park complete with farms and villages all operated in such a manner as to show an actual cross-section of the modes and social customs of the kingdom's early folk life. The attendants actually live and work as their forefathers did, wearing the typical regional dress of their province, dancing the old dances and singing the old songs. The dances, many of them dating back to Viking days, were brought back into popularity by the exhibitions given by the weavers, blacksmiths, farmers, shoemakers, etc., who live and work at Skansen. Free instruction is given in the art of dancing and its popularity, as well as the revival of the old colorful costumes, has spread to all Sweden and has caused a rebirth of Norse culture that is entirely free from continental European influence.

WOODEN SHOES

There are many versions of both the dance and lyrics to the melody we know as "Wooden Shoes". The following lyrics are an old Bohemian translation:

Annie goes to the cabbage field,
cabbage field, cabage field,
Seeking there some fresh green leaves,
to feed her rabbits fine.
Johnny sees her, ha, ha, ha,
Now I'll catch you, tra la, la,
Nay, nay, nay, go away,
I'll not dance with you today!



Francis Hanson from St. Paul, Minn., who rode down with Vyts Beliajus to Mexico shows off his acquisition of a Charro costume to Joan Fredine. His Serape is folded four times—quite a huge and a beautiful piece. This picture appeared in the Twin-City papers.

Francis Hanson is a Marine veteran and saw two years of service, 16 months of which were spent in the Pacific. He joined Morry Gelman's groups a little over a year ago, green as can be as far as the folk dancing is concerned, now, he is rapidly becoming quite a dancer. He appeared on television and belongs to Morry's workshop group.



From Sarah Gertrude Knott

Dear Vyts — Congratulations on the last grand issue of VILTS! How you do it is beyond me—financial and otherwise! I hate to see you, who has so much to give us all, simply GIVING, and that's what a subscription to VILTS really amounts to — it is a small amount for the effort it costs you! But what can we do — we who, like you, have no money?

Every time I get VILTS I sort rear back and feel proud like I don't know why. But I'll betcha many a person does the same thing — just feels so dad blamed proud that they went to burst — because of your accomplishments, your courage and your inimitable qualities that can't be put into words. We all in our special ways consider you our own. It is a funny thing, no one is jealous of the other but each one just knows that you are his or her best friend.

Vyts, there is something increasingly disturbing about VILTS as more and more it becomes the mouth piece for many of us. In a way, it's somewhat like the NFF, it reflects pulsing, changing United States. After reading the last issue, fascinated and interested as I always am, I had a peculiar feeling of being tired. There is just so much activity, much of it, it seems to me, running "wild loose!" In the past VILTS was calm like. It dealt with a few things in a quiet way that expresses you — now it is a conglomeration of the ideas of all of us. I wonder which would be best?

Sarah Gertrude Knott, St. Louis, Mo.

Hurray! Something Original!

I believe folks are beginning to realize what is happening to folk dancing out here. We just recently have been learning some real European dances. This one-two-three-point business seems to be losing zest. But — it still is bad enough. The latest one we have learned is Nola. Instead of one, two, three, point, it is one two, three, FOUR, point, point.

Georgie Hugerford, Berkely, Calif.

Thank You! — We Feel Pleased.

Enclosed are two bucks for my renewal of VILTS. It's refreshing to read after the tripe printed in some of the other magazines.

Paul J. Kermiet, Denver, Colo.

Writes Ralph Page, The New England Sage.

Before I get involved with a lot more, but less important work I feel that I MUST write you a note to tell you how much I enjoyed reading your article "Who Hoppened to the Square Dance?". Brother you hit a lot of nails right on the head, and I'm only envious because I do not have the words to have done an article along the same lines.

It was not only nails that you hit. You really curled the hair of some of the 'neophyte big-shots'. I certainly hope some of them get to read it and I believe they will for somebody will take care that they see it. Perhaps is asking too much to hope that they will acquire a grain of commonsense.

Uncle Wallace used to say: "A man ain't got no right to call unllies he's danced for at least ten years." How many of today's callers could qualify to that standard? You wouldn't have to be a student of higher mathematics to count them.

Ralph Page. Keene, N.H.